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Measures include polygraph tests, more curbs on Soviet travel in US

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The federal government is mounting a two-pronged attack against Soviet espionage activities in the United States.

- Making it more difficult for diplomats and other Soviet and East-bloc personnel to carry out their efforts to recruit Americans as spies. There are an estimated 1,000 intelligence officers among such personnel in the US, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It is likely that their travel and other activities may be further curtailed.

- Reexamining how best to prevent Americans from being enticed or coerced into spying. In this regard, the Walker spy case has given a new push to Pentagon efforts to expand the use of lie detectors in random counterintelligence screening of Americans with access to the nation's most sensitive secrets.

The heightened concern about Soviet espionage activities in the US has come as a result of a federal investigation that uncovered four current and former US Navy men who are alleged to have collected and sold classified documents to the Soviets. The ring is said to have operated for 20 years and been headed by John A.

Walker Jr., a private detective and former naval communications specialist from Norfolk, Va.

The Office of Naval Intelligence has assembled a 35-member team to try to piece together the extent of access the alleged Walker ring may have had to US secrets. In addition, it is attempting to answer an equally troubling question: How could Mr. Walker's suspected spying go on so long undetected by US counterintelligence agents?

According to US law enforcement officials, the Soviets expanded their intelligence presence and capabilities in the US after the years of détente in the 1970s. These include the use of Soviet diplomats, journalists, commercial personnel, and even visiting trade and scientific delegations. In addition, the United Nations Secretariat is said to be a hotbed of Soviet intelligence activity.

"Approximately one-fourth of the Soviets in the UN Secretariat are intelligence officers, and many more are co-opted by the KGB [the Soviet secret police]," the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence noted in a report released last week. "All Soviets in the Secretariat must respond to KGB requests for assistance."

The report continues: "The Soviets use their UN assignments to collect information on UN activities; to spot, assess, and recruit agents; to support worldwide intelligence operations; and to collect scientific and technical information of value to the USSR." It estimates that there are 800 Soviets working as international civil servants for the UN throughout the world.

Although Soviet diplomats stationed in the US are subject to travel restrictions imposed by the State Department, workers at the UN are free to travel throughout the country. The Soviets have used this loophole to their advantage, running espionage missions and recruiting spies from the United Nations headquarters in New York, the Senate report says.

A bill sponsored by Sen. William V. Roth Jr. (R) of Delaware would close the loophole by requiring that Soviet employees at the UN be subject to the same restrictions as those for Soviet diplomatic personnel elsewhere in the US.

Currently, according to the State Department, 279 Soviets are assigned to the Soviet Embassy in Washington and 41 assigned to the Soviet consulate in San Francisco. These officials are permitted to travel freely within a 25-mile radius of the city they live in, but they must notify the State Department if they plan to travel outside that radius.

In addition, there is an extensive list of areas completely closed to Soviet diplomats. It includes military bases, large defense contractors, and the Silicon Valley high-technology area near San Francisco.

The travel restrictions are in part intended to mirror similar Soviet restrictions placed on US diplomats in the Soviet Union, but they are also seen as a means of restricting the Soviets' espionage activities.

Indeed, the notification requirement for any travel outside the 25-mile radius assists US counterintelligence agents in keeping an eye on where the Soviets are going and whom they may be meeting.

Sens. Patrick J. Leahy (D) of Vermont and William S. Cohen (R) of Maine have introduced a provision to limit the number of Soviet diplomatic personnel in the US (currently 320) to the number of US personnel in the USSR (200).

On the other side of the espionage equation, Pentagon officials are considering expanding the use of polygraph machines to weed out future spies from the ranks of the US government. They reason that the suspected Walker spy ring might have been detected sooner had the suspects been subjected to routine polygraph exams while in the Navy.

Navy Secretary John F. Lehman Jr., Gen. John Wickham Jr., the Army chief of staff, and Adm. Bobby R. Inman, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, have all suggested that random, unannounced polygraph tests could serve as a deterrent to those contemplating espionage and as a means of rooting out those already involved in spying. They cite the Navy's random urinalysis tests and a corresponding drop in drug use in the Navy as an indication of the potential deterrent effect of random polygraph tests.

Proponents of the expanded tests suggest limiting the scope of the polygraph exams to two questions: one asking if the individual taking the test has any financial problems; the other asking if he or she has been involved in the unauthorized transfer of classified information to foreign governments.